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ABSTRACT

The problems brought to the Ombudsman Office at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, are considered. Many of the questions brought to the Ombudsman Office concern grades and grading practices, but nonacademic problems are also questioned. Many of the problems are the result of misinformation having been given to the student. Patronizing or rude treatment of students by university employees can also cause problems. Three academic problems that were brought to the office are described, and suggestions on how to minimize problems with students are offered. The issue of students seeking legal redress for problems occurring on the campus is addressed. (SW)

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THE OMBUDSMAN FUNCTION

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This number of the *Teaching-Learning Issues* has been prepared by Charles L. Cleland, ombudsman and professor of rural sociology.

You can not teach a man anything;
you can only help him to find it
within himself.

Galileo

Learning Research Center
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

THE OFFICE ON THE UTK CAMPUS

The Ombudsman Office, located in the University Center, opened in September of 1972. The charges to the Office were: 1) to assist individual students in the resolution of problems encountered in their dealings with the University, 2) to consult directly with any member of the University community in working for resolution of the problems, and 3) to make recommendations to faculty and administrators for changes which would help in avoiding such problems in the future. The Office was to be considered part of the Chancellor's Office with the chief occupant of the Office reporting directly to the Chancellor. The present staff consists of two persons specifically pursuing the Ombudsman role (each half-time) and a full-time secretary who is committed to providing assistance wherever she can.

From the beginning efforts have been made to prevent the appearance or understanding that this office was a substitute for functions carried on in any other unit of the campus. Concern was expressed that some of the employed members of this academic community might interpret the establishment of the office as relieving them of part of their responsibilities in dealing with students, but it was made inordinately clear that the intent was to assist in bringing about the more effective functioning of the University rather than diminishing anyone's responsibilities.

NATURE OF PROBLEMS COMING TO THE OFFICE

The average instructor might expect that the majority of questions brought to the Ombudsman Office would be those having to do with grades and grading practices, and that average instructor would be right if only questions about academic affairs were considered. Other academic-type questions occasionally raised concern such things as admission or readmission to the University or to some specific program within the University, accuracy of the records of students' achievements, or even requirements for graduation.

Not all the problems are in the academic realm, however. Non academic problems frequently encountered have to do with money, parking, auto registration, contracts for housing and/or food, and the use of various University facilities and services. In many instances students are only seeking reliable information about a given policy. They are willing to comply if they can only understand what the rules mean, assuming that they can find out what the rules are. For example, there is the matter of students being classified as in-state or out-of-state for fee purposes. The University has an interest in keeping as many students as possible classified as out-of-state because more money is the result. The determination of the classification is ultimately a judgment but it is based upon a variety of facts. The student who is interested in getting an out-of-state classification changed can obtain a copy of the rules for making such a change but understanding those rules without some detailed explanations is nearly impossible. Thus the question arises, where can one get help in really understanding the rules?

An older student is nearing graduation but has several incompletes from the last quarter; a month of library work will be required to remove them. Personal finances are exceptionally tight and the student is seeking the least expensive and most expeditious way to gain access to the library; normally it is not available to students unless they are registered for classes. A question about the problem is asked of three different sources, and the student is given three incorrect and contradictory answers: 1) a validated ID is necessary for use of the library, 2) registration for at least ten hours of classes is required to get a validated ID, and 3) access to the library could be had for one month for $40 without the validated ID. In desperation the student seeks a reasonable solution.

INTRODUCTION

Why write about the Ombudsman function? The principal reason is to share with the entire staff a sample of the problems brought to the Office in the hope that effective human relations within the University will be promoted. We need to make UTK as attractive as possible to present and prospective students while maintaining an appropriate concern for academic standards. The library episode illustrates the kind of treatment sometimes given students on this campus; such treatment can lead to dissatisfaction with their ability to get what UTK has to offer. Misinformation and half-truths about the regulations and services in any of the University's functions given in response to serious questions create the feeling that the student is not important here.

Interest in attracting and retaining students came sharply into focus last summer when the enrollment was down around one thousand from that which had been anticipated. It is believed by many that the feelings students have about the campus contributed to the drop. Since budget projections are made partly on the basis of the numbers of students enrolled, the reduction in enrollment resulted in a directive to the various budgetary units that a reduced amount of money would be available for their operation this fiscal year! There was another decline this fall. A secondary reason, then, for writing about the functions of the Office is financial. There must be a sense of urgency.

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Many of the problems that are brought are the result of misinformation having been given to the student. Most of the time such erroneous information is understood to be correct by the person giving it. Sometimes the informant is simply giving his or her best estimate of what the correct story is and hoping that the effect, if it is wrong, will not be damaging. In many instances, a simple phone call would have prevented a problem. Sometimes, but not always, it is the new or part-time employee who feels reluctant to ask questions. There are at least two apparent reasons why any individual gives misinformation: fear of displaying ignorance and not caring. Neither is excusable in the university setting.

A number of the problems brought in by students would have been ignored by the students had the person dealing with them not been inconsiderate or even downright rude. This treatment is not limited to any one office on the campus but occurs more frequently in the nonacademic areas. The message such action conveys is that the student is unimportant, a second-class citizen, someone who can scarcely be tolerated. The fact of the matter is that the student is one of the prinicpal reasons for the existence of the University.

A patronizing treatment can accomplish almost the same feeling in the student except that it makes it more difficult to find an object for one's anger. When students are treated as though they are not responsible individuals, it gives rise to feelings that they are not expected to be responsible. While for some this may be just like at home, it is appreciated by no one, and for the majority it is seen as a real put-down and most inappropriate for students in a university.

Reports from similar offices at other schools indicate that students elsewhere encounter the same kinds of problems as do those at UTK. This does not mean that nothing can be done about such problems, only that continuous effort is required to keep them at a minimum.

EXAMPLES OF ACADEMIC CASES

The following are actual recent local cases. They are somewhat exceptional but sufficiently similar to others so as to be instructive. They have been disguised in order that no participant can be identified; essential facts have not been changed.

Case A

This student was given a D in a junior level course; his performance on tests had led him to think it would be a B. There had been six exams; after bad weather caused several students to be absent for one or more class periods, it was announced that the lowest score of each student would be dropped.

The six scores for this student were 96, 68, 62, 100, 63, and 0 for an average of 77.80 (with the last score or the 0 dropped). If the 0 had been counted, the average would have been 69.83. In calculating the averages, however, not only was the last score dropped but so was the score for the fourth exam, the 100, without prior announcement, giving this student an average of 72.25. This average was converted to a D for the course. The rationale for dropping the fourth score was that all in the class had at-

tained perfect scores and the test was, therefore, not discriminating.

The student knew of the reputation of this professor for hard grading. He had heard that the highest averages in his courses were sometimes under 50 (with the top ones getting A's) so the student was rather pleased with his own exam grades. It was true that the range of grades and the averages were given following each exam and this student's grades were almost always below the average, but the 77.8 looked like a sure B to him when compared to past letter grade assignments by this instructor. There had been no indication during the course of even approximate numerical cut-off points for the various letter grades.

Final grade averages in the class (dropping the fourth exam) ranged from 96.4 to 34.2 Two students had under 40. Of the other twenty-seven students, none had an average lower than 70.0. The cutting points used in the final assignment of grades were approximately as follows:

A—above 90.0	C—74.0 to 83.0
B—85.0 to 90.0	D—70.0 to 72.3

When the student appealed to the instructor about the narrow range of the D's and the lack of guidelines about conversion of the scores to letter grades, the response was concern about grade inflation. It did not occur to the instructor that communicating the grading system change to the students might be important. For him the sole purpose of the exams was to obtain a distribution of grades. How he arrived at that was none of the student's business!

Case B

This student was concerned about having to do work for a course long after the quarter was over. The concern was magnified because: 1) the course was in a technical area, 2) the work had been turned in on time, and 3) the make-up work was essentially that of English composition. The course was listed at a sophomore level and it could be assumed that all of the registered students had completed freshman English. The student appealed to the department head who suggested that the instructor was asking more than was reasonable, given the nature of the course.

At the beginning of the course, the instructor had announced that a term paper would be required and that it would be due one week after the drop deadline. The timing of the due date took into account a technical project which would occupy the students in the second half of the quarter. There were general instructions to the effect that a properly prepared paper was expected. Most of the papers were turned in on time.

The problem arose when the instructor returned the papers to the thirty-five students two days before the end of the quarter with a detailed set of instructions about composition; these included emphasis upon adequate documentation. There was also a suggestion that the students would do well to get assistance from the English Writing Lab. A number of the students did go to the Lab (including B) and obtained written statements testifying to that fact.

The final blow came when, at the beginning of the next quarter, the papers from the students who had gone to the Writing Lab were returned

with the comment that they were unacceptable and would have to be rewritten—they had been given incompletes for the course. The principal reason given for the rewriting requirement was that the papers were improperly documented. That was when the student went to the department head seeking relief from work required after the end of the quarter.

Case C

This case deals with a student from a Middle Eastern country who was asked just before the middle of the quarter to drop a course because he had not taken a prerequisite one. The student had transferred to UTK from another American university. He was having difficulty getting formally admitted here because of a low TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) score. A higher score was required here in spite of the fact that the student had spent a successful year at another American university.

In an effort to avoid wasting his time and his parents' money, and because of his determination to attend the University of Tennessee, he had enrolled as a special student. This status permitted him to attend courses and to receive credit for them. As a special student, he was not considered as a major. Because of this, he was not assigned an advisor as is done systematically in the college in which he was taking most of his courses.

This student was somewhat intimidated by the size of UTK compared to the other university he had attended. His lack of formal admission and his alien status in the United States made him reluctant to seek any special treatment from faculty or administrators in the college of his choice. The availability of students who were countrymen in the same major he wanted also made the need for advice from a faculty advisor appear to be less important. He enrolled in this sophomore level course on the strength of the advice from his friends who had been through it and felt he could handle it.

The student was experiencing no difficulty with either the lab exercises or the homework assignments as the midpoint of the quarter approached; in fact, he had gotten perfect scores on several of the lab exercises. The grade for the course, however, was to be based on two examinations rather than upon lab performances and required homework reports.

The instructor learned that the student did not have the prerequisite course quite by accident and immediately went to see the department head for advice. They decided jointly that the student could not pass the course without the prerequisite in spite of his lab and homework performance and must be asked to drop the course. The message to the student was simply that he would not be permitted to continue.

The student at that time was carrying only six hours of coursework, having been excluded from another course earlier in the quarter because he did not have the prerequisites. He had not consulted the catalog description of the course which had the prerequisites listed. He had had at least one course transferred which he thought would be equivalent to the required course but it had not been evaluated by the Admissions Office. When the decision of the instructor was appealed to the department head, it was upheld.

STUDENTS AND THE COURTS

Each of the preceding cases was resolved in a manner which at least kept the students from going to court. Fortunately at UTK cases involving grades and the requirements for course completion have not been taken to court—this is not the case everywhere.

In other parts of the nation, dissatisfactions with university bungling of problems have led students to seek legal redress. In an Oregon case[1] last year, ten students felt they had received unfair grades and that the University had not provided adequate relief through the internal appeals system. Named as defendants in the suit were the instructor, the department head, the president, and the registrar.

The case involved a change of grading procedure without notification to the members of the class. The procedural change apparently took place following a field trip which had been supervised by a substitute instructor. The substitute was unhappy with the behavior of these students and so reported to the instructor who then assigned incompletes. When they objected and insisted on letter grades, the instructor responded by giving them relatively low grades. The matter was appealed through duly constituted University channels. It was concluded that the grading had been arbitrary and capricious and that the higher grades which had been earned should be assigned. The instructor refused to abide by the decision of his colleagues; he did not make the changes, and the University administrators would not insist that the changes be made.

Questionable course grades do not constitute the only reason students have taken universities to court. Some have had to do with reliance on misinformation given by university personnel. In one case,[2] the student had relied on advice from a dean and took two courses in absentia and then was refused his degree at the last minute because he "lacked two courses for graduation" according to official policy. The court insisted that the degree be conferred.

No such action has been taken here at UTK but this is not because of any lack of misinformation. Perhaps the consequences of the erroneous information have not yet been sufficiently serious. In one recent case, a student found himself in a very awkward situation at the middle of a quarter because he had relied on erroneous information from two different department heads. The matter was corrected but it could have been avoided altogether had the department heads been fully aware of the regulations under which they were operating.

The return to compulsory advising adds an element of collective responsibility to the University. If the student relies on the advice of an advisor and then finds the requirements for graduation not met when the student would normally graduate, the courts might very well decide that an appropriate officer of the University had been consulted and that the advice given was binding on the University. While students still have some responsibility for meeting all of the requirements, the rules and regulations are sufficiently complex and confusing that normal students could be expected to rely on an advisor's interpretation.

Then there was the student who asked a clerk in one of the administrative offices about the time limit for removing incompletes. After

the student left the office with incorrect information, the clerk was overheard wondering aloud if the information was accurate. Fortunately a person, a stranger in the office, who overheard ran after the student and got the matter straight. Not all of the members of the UTK staff are willing to make such an extra effort but extra effort to be of assistance is the essence of the Ombudsman function.

HOW TO MINIMIZE PROBLEMS WITH STUDENTS

In the academic area, most of the problems brought to the Ombudsman Office have to do with the classroom. In an effort to help faculty members at Ohio State University be more effective in their dealings with students, the University Ombudsman, Walt Craig,[3] sent out a newsletter with thirteen suggestions. These appear to apply here. What do you think?

1. Make sure that each student has an *up-to-date syllabus* which covers the course.
2. Be sure the syllabus clearly communicates course objectives and your expectations.
3. Clearly write each requirement for the course and the weight each will have in determination of the final grade.
4. Communicate clearly, preferably in writing, your expectations for papers and projects. Discuss grading criteria where evaluation may be considered subjective on your part.
5. Announce, both orally and in writing, field trips and other special meetings. If these may require activity on holidays and/or weekends, state this clearly. Discuss student responsibility in the course, as you perceive it.
6. Be as clear as possible about your grading criteria and invite students to discuss questions with you early in the course.
7. State your examination schedule and your adherence to stated policies. Communicate your policy as to make-up examinations.
8. If attendance is critical to the course, state this early and discuss your rationale. Attendance policy should be clear.
9. Have a definite policy stating your position on time extensions for paper and project completion. You may want to have a written policy available to hand to concerned students.
10. Make sure you have a system for evaluative feedback to the student before the Friday of the seventh week of the quarter. [The drop deadline.]
11. If you have a policy about a grade of Incomplete, "I," make this known. You may want to have a written document, signed by both you and the student, as to the specific reason for an "I" grade and what will be required to complete the course.
12. Locate your office and mail box for the students. If you have an office phone, provide the number. Announce your office hours or post them at your office door. Encourage student conferences; they can prevent a great many problems.
13. Retain all of your grading materials for timely review with students both during the quarter and after final grades. Students have a right to see the grading materials and hear your evaluation. Your evaluation and grading should be defensible to both the student and a third party, should there be a dispute. As a professional, you should take pride in professional and responsible evaluation techniques.

Our campus has a document which can help in much the same way, the "UTK Teaching/Learning Guidelines," which was hammered out in faculty and student groups. This statement appears in *Hilltopics* and will be in the *Faculty Handbook* which is to be distributed soon. Copies of the guidelines are also available from Vice Chancellor Walter Herndon's office.

Whether one deals with students in the classroom or not, the key to dealing effectively with them is to recognize that each one is a fellow human being striving to deal with the world in which s/he finds himherself. Sometimes the University world appears unnecessarily hostile; moreover, it is frequently seen as a complex and confusing organization, especially for those students who are new and those uncertain of their own goals. For such students, as well as for students in general, a smile, a kind word, an extra minute to make a phone call or any action which suggests that they are important fellow beings will make the University for them a friendly, desirable place to be. There is no good reason for it to be otherwise.

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